

Citizens Advisory Committee on Diversity Report to the Board of Education

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Background

The committee began this project not with a problem to solve, but with a general feeling that although informal observation of our schools and our neighborhoods suggest that Westlake is becoming more culturally and ethnically diverse, the student population, which is still predominantly white and Christian, lacks a certain degree of empathy when dealing with cultural and religious differences. Several incidents over the past few years suggest that Westlake students are somewhat culturally isolated and culturally unsophisticated.

The following quote written by a 2007 WHS graduate as part of a scholarship essay illustrates this point.

“ I have been raised in an absolutely gorgeous community that I love, but I feel the people, including myself, are a bit naïve about the world around us. We live in a very well setup community where things are a bit surreal. We all have nice things that our parents pay for and we don’t understand certain things about the rest of the world. When I go to college, I hope to expand my horizons by learning about different cultures, hearing individual’s life experiences, and of course learning about myself.”

This report outlines what the committee learned about why the diversity issue is important and how it is being addressed nationally, regionally, and within our own district.

What is Diversity?

It is difficult to nail down a specific definition of diversity within the school context, but this quote from Gary Marx in *Sixteen Trends: Their Profound Impact on Our Future*, provides a good framework for understanding.

“Diversity should be an inclusive word, but defining diversity is not a simple matter. Generally, we think of it as encompassing racial and ethnic groups. However, the richness of inclusion has been stretched to recognize differences in age, gender, social and a host of other factors. Some communities have taken steps to see minorities based more on social and economic differences than on racial and ethnic ones. In the future, minorities and majorities might be singled out based on the quality of education they’ve received.”¹

¹ Marx, Gary (2006) *Sixteen Trends, Their Profound Impact on Our Future: Implications for Students, Education, Communities, Countries, and the Whole of Society*; Educational Research Service

Why is Diversity an Important Issue?

The diversity issue is important to Westlake schools because of several community concerns which were raised in 2004 and again in 2006 and also because the demands of an increasingly interdependent world mandate that our students are prepared to compete in a global marketplace.

Community Concerns Raised in 2004

In 2004 the Westlake Parent Connection (WPC) facilitated several discussions on the issue of diversity. The WPC had been approached by a concerned parent who felt that there was a need for a dialogue on diversity. Under the leadership of the WPC several important discussions took place.

- **Community Diversity Forum**

In April the WPC hosted a forum for individuals to discuss their concerns with issues of diversity in the Westlake community and to develop a plan of action to address these issues to create a community where all feel welcome. Minutes from this forum can be found in the Supporting Information section.

- **National Conference for Community and Justice (NCCJ) Program**

In late April and May, the WPC hosted and funded the NCCJ Honest Conversations program at WHS. As part of this program, participants examine their own perceptions surrounding diversity, examine their community in terms of diversity, and create an action plan based on their observations. In all 21 students and 13 adults participated. Minutes from this meeting and a description of the program can be found in the Supporting Information section.

- **Meeting with School Administrators**

In August, the several members of the WPC met with school superintendent, Dr. Constanza, and most of the building principals to discuss the concerns raised at the Diversity Forum and the Honest Conversations program. The aim was to identify steps that could be taken to further promote a positive learning environment for all. Minutes from this meeting can be found in the Supporting Information section.

In late 2004 an article entitled ***Young, Muslim & Misunderstood*** appeared in the November issue of Cleveland Magazine. The article examined race relations between Arab-American and other students at Westlake High School. This article can be found in the Supporting Information section.

Community Concerns Raised in 2006

During the initial CAC meetings this year, the observation was made that our neighborhoods and by extension our schools have become more culturally diverse. This project was proposed to try to understand how the schools are responding to this changing climate within the Westlake community.

In January of 2007, a WHS junior wrote an article which appeared in the *Cleveland Jewish News* as part of their Teen Reporter Series. In the article she talks about how it feels to be a non-Christian student at WHS. Even after all of the work that was done in 2004, her experiences suggest that positively addressing diversity is still an issue at the high school. This article can be found in the Supporting Information section.

The Global Society

Although providing a welcoming environment for all is certainly a noble idea, one may ask why schools should be concerned about multiple cultures, especially when they serve a community that is not diverse. According to Gary Marx it is simply that “wherever students grow up, they ultimately will have to survive and thrive in a multicultural world, made even smaller by instant communication and rapid transportation. Furthermore, as nations vie for understanding and respect in an interdependent world, international learning, including diplomatic skills will become basic. To earn respect in an interdependent world, nations will be expected to demonstrate their reliability and tolerance.”²

This same idea is put forth by Thomas Friedman in *The World is Flat*. According to Friedman, the world has entered a new economic phase Globalization 3.0 – characterized by the newfound power for *individuals* to collaborate and compete globally. “Because it is flattening and shrinking the world, Globalization 3.0 is going to be more and more driven not only by individuals but also by a much more diverse - non-Western, non-white – group of individuals. Individuals from every corner of the flat world are being empowered. Globalization 3.0 makes it possible for so many more people to plug in and play and you are going to see every color of the human rainbow take part.”³

Data on US population projections broken down by race is given in the Supporting Information section.

² Marx, Gary (2006) Sixteen Trends, Their Profound Impact on Our Future: Implications for Students, Education, Communities, Countries, and the Whole of Society; Educational Research Service

³ Friedman, Thomas (2005), *The World is Flat: A Brief History of the Twenty-First Century*; Farrar, Straus, and Giroux

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Methodology

Literature Review

Review of Westlake School District

We initially requested feedback from the teaching and administrative staff at several buildings via an informal email survey. We received a handful of quality responses and used that feedback to schedule follow-up interviews with several individuals.

The committee conducted interviews with several members of the teaching staff and administration, including Jim Lloyd, Director of Pupil Personnel, Ray Conti, Curriculum Director, Tim Freeman, WHS principal, and Tim Clark, WHS Social Studies Teacher.

Review of Neighboring School Districts

The committee attended a presentation by Joe Lobo and Chevawn Lawrie of Lakewood City schools. Lakewood has begun implementing a program based on the framework laid out in Glenn Singleton's book, *Courageous Conversations*, in the hopes of addressing the root cause of the achievement gap between African-American students and other student groups within Lakewood schools.

Review of Other School Districts

The committee contacted several representatives from the Birmingham and Rochester school districts in Michigan to gather information on their approach to diversity.

Findings

The committee's findings address nationally-recognized best practices, diversity programs currently in place within the Westlake school district, diversity programs in neighboring school districts, and diversity programs in other states.

Nationally Recognized Best Practices

Banks Multicultural Benchmarks

The benchmarks outlined by James A. Banks in *An Introduction to Multicultural Education* are an excellent example of nationally recognized best practice in the area of multicultural education.

The Banks benchmarks define eight important components of a multicultural school.⁴ These components are the policy statement, staff attitudes, school staff, curriculum, parent involvement, teaching strategies, teaching methods, and monitoring.

1) Policy Statement

A multicultural education policy statement sanctions and supports diversity.

A policy statement on multicultural education establishes the school board's commitment to schools in which students from all groups have an equal opportunity to learn.

The policy statement serves to

- legitimize multicultural education within the district,
- facilitate the creation of programs and practices that promote cultural diversity and equal educational opportunities for all,
- communicate to parents and the community that multicultural education is a priority in the district,
- provide a rationale for multicultural education, and
- establish guidelines for staff to develop and apply a comprehensive multicultural education plan.

2) Staff Attitudes

The staff of a multicultural school has positive attitudes and expectations toward diverse students.

⁴ Banks, J.A. (1999), *An Introduction to Multicultural Education*(2nd Ed.). Boston: Allyn and Bacon.

Continuous professional development opportunities ensure an adequate knowledge base in multicultural education and address the needs of staff that do not have a positive attitude toward a variety of racial, ethnic, and cultural groups.

3) School Staff

The staff of a multicultural school reflects ethnic and cultural diversity.

As student beliefs can be strongly influenced by their experiences, the composition of school staff should represent the racial and cultural diversity in U.S. society. This encourages an understanding that our society values and respects people from different groups.

4) Curriculum

A multicultural curriculum is transformational and action-focused. It includes concepts, events, issues, and problems from different ethnic perspectives and points of view.

5) Parent Involvement

Parent participation provides a cultural context for teaching and a link to a student's personal and cultural knowledge.

Helping students achieve and succeed is more effective when parents and the larger community are involved. It is the school's responsibility to reach out to its surrounding community and welcome outside involvement.

6) Teaching Strategies

In a multicultural school, teaching strategies are constructivist, personalized, empowering, and participatory.

Students should be given many opportunities to express their feelings and emotions and to participate in dialogues and cooperative groups with their peers. This is important to teach students that diversity is valued and different perspectives are a vital part of the curriculum.

7) Teaching Materials

Multicultural teaching materials reflect the historical and contemporary experiences of a range of ethnic and cultural groups.

8) Monitoring

An effective evaluative program provides the feedback necessary to determine whether multicultural benchmarks are being met and determines future directions to follow to ensure the ongoing improvement of a school's multicultural climate.

National Conference for Community and Justice

The mission of the National Conference for Community and Justice is to fight bias, bigotry, and racism in America.

This organization promotes the idea that well-trained school officials and staff are empowered to lead on the issue of diversity. With adequate training, school officials and staff are able to acknowledge, challenge and reduce their own biases, stereotypes, and prejudices and can be visible advocates for inclusion; creating opportunities for access to others and taking responsibility for connecting with and learning about "others".⁵

Addressing Diversity in the Westlake School District

Westlake addresses the issue of diversity in several different ways, such as school policies, the Social Studies curriculum, the Language Arts curriculum, the Guidance plan and curriculum, programs at individual schools, Guidance staff In-Service, and the School Climate survey.

School Policies

The Westlake school policies listed below serve to foster a mutual understanding and respect for all individuals and their beliefs. They ensure that teaching about religion is aligned with the Board-approved curriculum, that the K-12 curriculum presents the contributions and achievements of the races and cultures of the world, that all students have the opportunity to develop a positive self-image, and that staff in-service opportunities are provided annually to stress the importance of strengthening human relations.

- Human Relations Education (IGAB)
- Teaching About Religion (IGAC)
- School Ceremonies and Observances (IND/INDA)

Social Studies Curriculum

The People in Societies section of the Social Studies curriculum within the Ohio Academic Content Standards directs that students use knowledge of perspectives,

⁵ www.nccj.org

practices and products of cultural, ethnic and social groups to analyze the impact of their commonality and diversity within the local, national, regional and global settings.

Specific grade level indicators are outlined for grades K – 12. For example, a comparative study of world religions is outlined for grade 6. A complete list of grade level indicators is provided in the Supporting Information section of this document.

Language Arts Curriculum

The Literary Text standard of the Language Arts curriculum within the Ohio Academic Content Standards directs that students enhance their understanding of the human story by reading literary texts that represent a variety of authors, cultures and eras. They learn to apply the reading process to the various genres of literature, including fables, folk tales, short stories, novels, poetry and drama. They demonstrate their comprehension by describing and discussing the elements of literature, analyzing the author's use of language, comparing and contrasting texts, inferring theme and meaning and responding to text in critical and creative ways. Strategic readers learn to explain, analyze and critique literary text to achieve deep understanding.

Guidance Plan and Curriculum

The Westlake Guidance Department has developed a curriculum to teach individuality to grades K – 8. The emphasis is on developing a positive identity and self-confidence. Guidance counselors conduct classroom lessons throughout the year.

Individual schools also have programs to highlight the importance of the guidance lessons. For example, Bassett Elementary has the CARES program which recognizes students for

- **Caring:** Treating others with kindness and listening when they speak.
- **Acting Responsibly:** Following directions the first time given and keeping our schools neat and clean.
- **Respectful:** Using kind and caring words and using an indoor voice.
- **Excelling:** Coming to school prepared to learn and putting forth your best effort daily.
- **Self Control:** Behaving in a safe manner and keeping hands, feet, and objects to yourself.

Fifth and sixth graders at Parkside Intermediate participate in the Peacemakers program where they discuss what it means to be a tolerant person in our world today. Guidance staff lead student discussions on this topic by the posing questions such as, is it possible of for people of diverse ethnicity, race and religions to get along? The Peacemaker guidance unit culminates with voting for each classroom's "peacemaker." These students are then recognized at a special school-wide ceremony each February.

Diversity Programs at Westlake Schools

There are many programs in place across the district that address diversity and tolerance. A few highlights from the high school and Holly Lane Elementary are given below.

WHS

- The Diversity Club coordinated by Amy Klenz, WHS English.
- The Model UN and Politics Club coordinated by Tim Clark, WHS Social Studies.
- The Leadership Challenge Diversity Group coordinated by Kathy McGinty, WHS Substance Abuse Prevention Coordinator
- The Baccalaureate program, coordinated by parents of graduating seniors, serves as a spiritual send-off for the district's graduates. Attendance and participation in this event has increased in the past few years as a direct result of the planning committee's commitment to inclusion and the selection of a non-denominational setting for the event. (Because of its religious content, this program is not sponsored by the district.)

Holly Lane

- The PeaceBuilder program works to build peace at home, at school, and in the community each day.
- The Diveri-tree project culminated the fourth graders study of immigration. In lieu of a traditional Christmas tree, the students celebrated their cultural heritage by decorating a tree with ornaments that had a personal cultural significance.
- The Words of Wisdom program incorporates positive messages about diversity, tolerance, and acceptance into each day's morning announcements.

Guidance Staff In-Service (January 2007)

In January of this year, Dr. Neda Zawahri, Assistant Professor of Political Science at Cleveland State University with research interests in South Asia and the Middle East, conducted an in-service with all guidance counselors and several administrators from LBMS and WHS.

With a better understanding of the Arab-American culture, the guidance staff feels it is better prepared to serve Arab-American students and parents within the district.

School Climate Survey (May 2007)

As part of the Continuous Improvement Plan, a school climate survey was conducted. Input was obtained from staff, students, and parents.

Diversity Programs in Neighboring Schools

In response to the growing achievement gap between African-American students and other student groups within their district, Lakewood High School has begun implementing a program based on the framework laid out in *Courageous Conversations*⁶, by Glenn Singleton.

Courageous Conversations examines the achievement gap through the prism of race and explains the need for candid, courageous conversations about race so that educators may understand why performance inequity persists and learn how they can develop a curriculum that promotes true academic parity.

Several staff members from Lakewood HS attended a conference held at Cleveland State University in the fall of 2006 to learn how to implement programs based on Singleton's work. Beginning in January 2007, Lakewood High School Social Studies teacher, Joe Lobo, has been facilitating a weekly discussion group on race with a racially mixed group of Lakewood students. The program has been well-received by staff and students alike and draws 20 to 30 students each week after school for 1 ½ to 2 hours.

Encouraged by the support that they feel from attending this afterschool program, several students in this group have started a constructive online dialogue about race on Lakewood High's MySpace web page. Many Lakewood residents have also contributed to an online blog concerning race in the Observation Deck section of the Lakewood City Schools web site.

Diversity Programs in Other School Districts

The committee reviewed diversity initiatives in the Birmingham Public School System in Birmingham, Michigan and the Rochester Public School System in Rochester, Michigan.

Although larger than the Westlake School District, both school systems serve communities that closely resemble Westlake in terms of ethnicity and socio-economic factors.

Birmingham Public Schools System

The Birmingham Public Schools system in Birmingham, Michigan is about twice the size of the Westlake school system. The Birmingham school system serves 8100 students and consists of 8 elementary schools, 2 middle schools, 2 high schools, and a school of choice serving grades 3 through 8.

In the late 1980's the leadership team of the Birmingham district recognized the need to address issues of diversity within the schools. Their plan consisted of several key components which are outlined below.

⁶ **Courageous Conversations about Race:** A Field Guide for Achieving Equity in Schools, Glenn E. Singleton, Curtis Linton, Curtis Linton

- **District-wide Diversity Committee**

The committee focused on racial, religious, and cultural diversity. Initially its focus was on formulating diversity activities for district-wide in-service on Martin Luther King Jr. Day and other in-service days. These in-service sessions helped the staff to realize that the more they could understand each other, break down stereotypes and prejudice and begin difficult dialogues, the better the learning environment would be for students.

The committee was key in encouraging the Human Resources department to make efforts in hiring staff that represents the district's student population in culture and race.

The committee currently develops and implements the District-wide Diversity Plan of Action for each school year.

- **Religion and the Schools Policy and Regulation**

In 1990 the district adopted a Religion and the Schools policy. One goal of this policy is to "educate children for a culturally diverse world". This policy was further revised in 1997.

- **Developed a Resource Guide on Religion**

A resource guide for school staff, entitled, *A Resource Guide about Religion*, was produced in 1990 as part of a collaborative effort between the Greater Detroit Interfaith Round Table of the National Council and the Birmingham school system. Birmingham teachers wrote the resource based on lectures by prominent religious leaders from the Detroit area. The draft document was then reviewed by a panel of religious experts and approved for use by the Board of Education.

This resource guide, which was updated in both 1997 and 2007, is used as part of a program to educate school employees "so that each possesses the knowledge base to assist our students in learning about each other." It offers information about major religions and addresses special circumstances about which teachers may need to be aware. It covers all religions represented within the Birmingham school system.

- **Evolution of the District-wide Diversity Committee**

Over time the work of the district-wide Diversity Committee has evolved. Each building within the school system now has its own Diversity Committee to expand and personalize programming and in-service opportunities for each individual school and the issue of diversity has become a seamless part of the each school's operation.

The district-level committee still provides a key leadership role and is tasked with drafting a Diversity Plan of Action each year.

Relevant Birmingham school policies, excerpts from *A Resource Guide about Religion*, and a draft Diversity Plan of Action for the 2006/2007 school year are provided in the Supporting Information section.

Rochester Public Schools System

The Rochester Public Schools system in Rochester, Michigan is about three times the size of the Westlake school system. The Rochester school system serves 14,500 students and consists of 13 elementary schools, 4 middle schools, and 3 high schools.

The diversity initiatives in Rochester are similar to those in Birmingham. The plan consists of

- System-wide Diversity Committee

The goal of the committee is to coordinate diversity initiatives across the school system. The committee works in conjunction with the school administration and the school board to establish programs that are thematic and sustainable. It is composed of representatives from each building and it meets quarterly.

- Commitment to In-service

The school system has begun to train about 25 to 30 employees as in-house diversity trainers. The employees are from all staff areas. The aim of the training is to help employees develop a self-awareness about diversity.

Recommendations

- **Update District Mission Statement**

The mission statement of Westlake City Schools should emphasize the importance of being culturally responsive in order to prepare **all students** to succeed in an era of rapid change.

The right mission statement can send a powerful message to all that there is a strong commitment throughout the district to prepare Westlake students to “use their skills to positively influence a diverse and rapidly changing world”.

- **Establish a District-Wide Diversity Committee**

Efforts in addressing the issue of diversity should be coordinated by a district-wide committee that uses **nationally-recognized benchmarks**, such as Banks, as guidelines.

Establishing a dedicated committee ensures **ownership and a continuing commitment** to the important work and programs currently place within the district.

The committee should be led by an **empowered leader** with the time and resources to coordinate efforts across school boundaries.

The committee should be a **collaborative effort** comprised of staff, parents, community members, and students.

The committee would be charged with developing an **annual Diversity Plan of Action** which would address specific short-term and long-term goals related to the diversity benchmarks. These goals would then become part of the district’s Strategic Plan.

- **Establish a Multicultural Education Policy Statement**

As the first multicultural benchmark defined by James Banks, the policy statement establishes the **school board’s commitment** to schools in which all students have an equal opportunity to learn.

The policy statement **defines the guidelines** to be used by district staff to develop and apply a comprehensive multicultural education plan.

- **Professional Development to Address Attitudes and Expectations**

Professional development is needed to create an inclusive school culture that works to **affirm**, not just tolerate, differences.

Issues of race, gender, ability, class, and religion must be addressed in any plan that seeks to build a truly inclusive organization.

There should be a budgetary commitment to ongoing professional development for all staff.

Conclusion

It is clear that many programs and initiatives that relate to the issues of diversity exist across the Westlake School District. From the district's Guidance Plan to the mandates of the Social Studies and Language Arts curricula to the many extracurricular activities it is easy to see that the issues of diversity and tolerance play a important role in the education of Westlake's children. However, competing in a global marketplace requires an even deeper and comprehensive commitment to this issue.

It is time to take things to the next level. Through strong leadership and a clear sense of ownership on diversity issues, the board and the district will ensure that the important work already being done will not only continue but will expand to encompass an ever-changing set of cultural demands, challenges, and opportunities.

In the words of Gary Marx, "Growing numbers of people and nations will discover that if we manage our diversity well it will enrich us. If we don't manage our diversity well, it will divide us."⁷ The time is right to embrace our differences in order to remain competitive as a school district, empower Westlake students to compete globally, and grow the excellence to become *the* district in northeast Ohio that leads with a proactive and comprehensive diversity program.

⁷ Marx, Gary (2006) Sixteen Trends, Their Profound Impact on Our Future: Implications for Students, Education, Communities, Countries, and the Whole of Society; Educational Research Service

Supporting Information

Cleveland Magazine Article

Cleveland Jewish News Essay

Westlake Parent Connection Forums (2004)

NCCJ Honest Conversations Program (2004)

US Population Projections by Race

K-12 Social Studies Curriculum Grade-Level Indicators

K-12 Language Arts Curriculum Grade-Level Indicators

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Birmingham School District Draft Diversity Plan of Action (2006)